

RECENT OBSERVATIONS ON *HISTRIONICUS HISTRIONICUS* IN MAINE.

BY ARTHUR H. NORTON.

IN THE month of February, 1894, the writer spent several days on some of the outermost islands of Penobscot Bay, for the sole purpose of observing and collecting winter birds, and more especially to observe this species in life. I was accompanied by Mr. Fred Rackliff, a man admirably qualified for the work before us, he being an expert surfman, thoroughly acquainted with the region we had chosen, and a skilful ornithological collector. Had I been otherwise attended, my efforts in this connection would have been futile, owing to the sudden and violent changes of weather and sea on this coast in winter, and to the distance and roughness of the islands where we were to perform our labors.

Our departure was made from the main on Feb. 2 at 2 P. M., with a light westerly wind and smooth sea, we arriving at our first station about sunset. This was an island two miles in length, reduced by the sea to a ledge. At this place we had little hope of finding Harlequins, as I was told that there was but a single 'gutter' here, where the birds had been found with any regularity. Our objective point was an islet lying half a mile away which I was assured was the chief resort of these birds in this vicinity ten years earlier, when they could always be found, in winter around a particular arm of water or gutter, formed at low stages of the tide, on the outermost and roughest part of the islet.

For several days following we were greatly hampered in our movements by stormy weather, and not until the morning of Feb. 6 did we see our first Harlequins. On this morning the wind and sea were quite calm, the tide at about one hour of flood at sunrise, making the little niche alluded to a steep-sided, narrow cove into which the sea was but gently breaking. Very shortly after sunrise we saw a flock of eight Harlequins heading for it, with a swift, straight flight, and without a pause they dropped into the surf near it. We had already left the place, and witnessed this flight from a distance, but we quickly returned, and fastening our boat crept forward over and among the ragged rocks until we saw them

plainly, when we paused to watch them. They were well into the gutter, in a compact group and evidently had just finished feeding, as they now commenced drifting out, resting on the water as lightly as gulls. One would rise on its tail to flap its wings and settle back to shake its plumage, when the act would be repeated by another, the whole flock turning around and around, in a leisurely way, with such perfect ease that no effort was appreciable.

Before we were within gun-shot, a Black-backed Gull came high in the air, and as quickly as his sharp eye beheld us, he gave two or three guttural notes, whereupon every duck leaped to wing and without a pause flew directly back over the route by which they came, fading from view in the distance. From the course they had followed we had no doubt, that they had been driven from an isolated ledge lying two and a half miles to sea, by a lobster man whom we saw, and that they returned to it. And from the fact, that we found none of them around these islands, and that the lobstermen living here and passing the islet several times each week had seen but one flock of seven birds during the winter, I am confident that they were located at this ledge. On account of its exposed position, and lack of good landing places, we may hope that they are secure for some time to come.

The day was so calm that we decided to move to the next islands, two ledgy masses lying five miles to the eastward. Both were destitute of trees and shrubs, the largest, about seventy acres in extent, being the headquarters of two parties of lobster-fishers, whose hospitalities we were glad to accept, as there was no shelter for our tent. Shortly after noon the wind breezed from the southwest and increased steadily throughout the afternoon. The following morning we found a gale blowing from the same point, and the sea breaking a hundred yards from the tide mark. Just above the demolishing force of the waves great windrows of sea froth, charged with a gray slime were heaped, often rolling before the wind, or breaking into fragments and flying. Several times I was buried to the shoulders in the driven mass. When this reached the snow line, the water was quickly absorbed leaving the scum at the surface. A few hundred yards from the windward shore of the 'Big Island'

was a ledge submerged at high water, but at low stages of the tide connected with the island by a line of rocky reef. Thus a small bay was formed, several acres in extent, having at high tide a considerable depth, except at its edges, where its great billows were breaking during the period of high water.

At about 9 A. M. we saw a flock of not less than thirty Harlequins in this bay. Though they were beyond gunshot of the shore, I had ample opportunity to watch them, as they remained until about 3.30 P. M., when the tide was so low that the sea broke before entering the bay. Near at hand were numbers of Eiders and Scoters, rendering comparison easy.

The Harlequins were attracted to the largest billow, one which surged high and sharp, and broke about fifty yards from the reef where its force was spent. For considerable intervals the ducks would sit facing the wind, but not advancing, slightly removed from the fury of the breaker. Then drawing nearer to it they would dive to feed. Frequently all would be under at once, but this diving seemed to depend slightly on the action of the sea, as a portion of the flock, apparently not ready to dive on being threatened by a breaker, would plunge into it, only to rise after some time had elapsed. After a few plunges they would rest on the surface of the water, usually in the path of the great breaker, apparently in mere wantonness. Now they were in little groups scattered parallel with the length of the wave, awaiting the rushing flood. From my position I could not observe the slightest sign of concern in them as it approached. As it rushed over the inequalities of the bottom its crest began breaking at corresponding intervals. High above them it topped, and as its crest broke in white foam, the little ducks plunged headlong into its front, almost instantly reappearing in its train, while perhaps others a few feet from them, with unerring calculations, would ride over an unbroken part as lightly as bubbles. It was here that this beautiful lightness of body was shown to be an important feature in their economy.

In all the time that I watched them none plunged into the breaker until its crest was foaming. At this pastime they spent considerably more time than they had in feeding, and when seemingly satisfied they swam to a smooth position to rest facing

the wind, or a few would pay a visit of inspection to the Eiders and Scoters, quickly returning to their own kind. Then all would return to feed or frolic in the breaker.

The following day the wind and sea were sufficiently moderated to make landing on the little island possible, an opportunity which we improved early in the day. This island, I was told, formerly afforded the birds a favorite resort, and many crevices were pointed out to me as their old-time haunts. On this occasion we found but a single flock of nine birds, resting idly on the water, off the mouth of one of these crevices. We waited for some time, but they drifted farther out.

The next morning, February 9, was very calm and we went to a large off-lying ledge a mile away and set decoys for ducks. Shortly after sunrise a pair of 'Ladies' came and lit in a shallow cave, where they paused but a moment, and then flew away. About half an hour later a grand flock of thirty or forty came in sight heading for us, but when about a hundred yards away, for some cause they sheered off to the west, disappearing in the distance, not stopping at either of the islands. As they passed us away from the sun, the light was perfect, making the adult males, which constituted a good portion of the flock, very conspicuous. The flock was compact, the birds moving swiftly, about ten feet above the water, with very quick wing strokes, their dashing manner and lightness of flight suggesting *Passerine* birds.

Shortly before noon of the same day we went to the little island and again found the nine birds at the same place where they had been observed the day before, this time very close to the gutter. They were warned of our presence by a Black-backed Gull, not, however, before we were within a very long shot of them and five fell at a single discharge. All appeared to be young males, in changing plumage. An example now at hand has the worn and faded feathers of the old dress, and the fresh, bright ones of the new showing in various parts of it, but most conspicuously in the upper tail-coverts and the tail, where the contrast is great. The two middle tail-feathers and upper tail-coverts, except three feathers scattered among the new, are of the new plumage, unworn and of a glossy blackish, while the

rest of the tail and the rump are of the old plumage, worn and faded to a dull, grayish brown shade.

Compared with the other ducks of this coast, with which their habits often throw them in life, the combination of small size, dark color and buoyancy, in air or water, is distinctive. *Somateria* and *Oidemia* are heavy, at rest or in flight, though none but small examples of *O. americana* approach *Histrionicus* in size. The color is at once sufficient to distinguish it from *Clangula hyemalis*, when they are together on this coast.

Mr. Rackliff pointed out numerous gutters, where he said that when a youth he had seen the 'Sea-mice' crowding in, when sad havoc was often made among them by the boy gunners. The older gunners seldom made effort to take them, as they were of small value. They were very easily plucked of their feathers, a fact which made them an object of playful contests at the plucking of the day's gunning.

In speaking of these birds he commonly called them Sea-mice; and in answer to my question, said that they made a squeaking note like mice, and thus received that name among the gunners of that vicinity. He also said that they were very playful in their actions, frequently flying in to a chosen resort to drop into the water and, without a decided stop, resume their flight to another quarter; or they would fly in and dive from the air, reappearing on the wing and away again. (For another note on their playfulness, see Dutcher, *Auk*, Vol. III, p. 434.)

The birds are known to fly to a great height. (See Pennant, Latham, and Wilson.) This is a habit probably not observed on this coast in winter, and might be doubted by those observing only the winter birds; fortunately, however, Audubon has shown that this is a habit in flying over the land, under which conditions they were probably observed by Pennant or his observers.

That the species is gregarious under favorable conditions is ably attested. (Audubon, Elliot, and Stejneger.) I believe that I am correctly informed concerning its voice, at least during its abode on this coast.

As to its breeding on the coasts of Maine and Nova Scotia in early days I have no more evidence than other ornithologists, but as regards the subject of breeding and family cares, I regard

Audubon's account of this species as delightfully accurate. Of published information relating to this species in Maine, that of "W. B." appears to be the most comprehensive, namely: "The Harlequin Duck is regularly common in winter on the coast of Maine, where, however, its distribution seems to be very local." (Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club, VIII, p. 163.) To which I would add: Common only to the eastern half of the coast, where it is steadily but slowly decreasing.

Finally, I believe that there are three things favorable to this bird's holding its range: (1) The lateness and severity of the season when it is here. (2) The roughness and inaccessibility of the places to which it is now restricted. (3) The abundance and vigilance of the Gulls.

SOME NOTES ON THE PASSENGER PIGEON (*ECTOPISTES MIGRATORIUS*) IN CONFINEMENT.

BY RUTHVEN DEANE.

IN THE 'American Field' of December 5, 1895, I noticed a short note, stating that Mr. David Whittaker of Milwaukee, Wis., had in a spacious enclosure, a flock of fifty genuine Wild Pigeons. Being much interested of late in this bird, I at once wrote to Mr. Whittaker, asking for such information in detail regarding his birds as he could give me, but owing to absence from the city, he did not reply. Still being anxious to learn something further regarding this interesting subject, I recently wrote to a correspondent in Milwaukee, asking him to investigate the matter. In due time I received his reply, stating that he had seen the Pigeons, but that the flock consisted of fifteen instead of fifty birds, and inviting me to join him, and spend a few hours of rare pleasure.

On March 1, 1896, I visited Milwaukee, and made a careful inspection of this beautiful flock. I am greatly indebted to Mr. Whittaker, through whose courtesy, we saw and heard so much of